



Certifying Citizenship: Introduction to U.S. Naturalization Records

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History

Naturalization is the process by which a native or citizen of one country becomes a citizen of a different country. Those who became citizens were given more opportunities than non-citizens. Some immigrants naturalized to be allowed to buy and sell land, participate in voting or political office, or simply for patriotic reasons. It was not a requirement for immigrants to naturalize, and not all who began the process completed in it.

Collective Naturalization

Collective naturalization is the process of naturalizing an entire group of people without the creation of documents. The first collective naturalization occurred in 1776 when the Colonies separated from Britain. Many territories and groups participated in Collective Naturalization, including the following:

Territories

- 1803 – Louisiana Purchase
- 1819 – Florida
- 1845 – Texas
- 1848 – Mexico Territory
- 1867 – Alaska
- 1898 – Hawaii
- 1917 – Puerto Rico

Groups

- 1868 – African Americans
- 1898 – Children*
- 1922 – Women*
- 1924 – Native Americans
- 1943 – Asian Americans

Derivative

Derivative Naturalization is the process of receiving one's citizenship through or from another person. This occurred for two groups: women and children.

Women

- 1804 – A woman's citizenship began to be dependent on her marital status.
- 1855 – A woman's citizenship went through her husband's citizenship or naturalization.
- 1907 – Expatriation Act removed a woman's citizenship if she married a foreign-born citizen, regardless of her birth.
- 1922 – Cable Act repelled the Expiration Act, so a woman could no longer lose her citizenship.
- 1936 – Women who lost their citizenship from the Expatriation Act could regain it if they were no longer married to a foreign-born, either by death or divorce.
- 1940 – Women could regain their lost citizenship regardless of the marriage.

Children

- 1790-1940 – A child automatically became a citizen with their father.
- 1804-1934 – A mother could not pass on her citizenship to her children.
- 1824-1906 – Minors could naturalize without a declaration once they turned twenty-one.
- 1907 – All foreign-born children had to register with a consulate once they turned eighteen.
- 1934 – A child must have been residing for five-years in the U.S. for derivative naturalization to apply.

Pre-1790

Before 1790, naturalization took place through British Rule. If a colonist was born in Britain, then they were already considered a citizen of the colonies. If a colonist was not born in Britain, then they would need to naturalize in Britain if they wished to be a citizen of the colonies.

Types of Naturalization

- Denization was partial naturalization. A person was given the opportunity to vote and purchase land; however, they could not run for political office nor pass their land to heirs.
- Oath of Allegiance was full naturalization. They were given all privileges of a citizen including voting, running for office, buying land, and passing on land to their heirs.
- Collective Citizenship was group naturalization in 1776 when the United States was formed. All persons living in the Colonies became citizens of the United States.

Value of Pre-1790

These records did not usually contain much information. They can still help you discover where your ancestor came from and where they were living in the colonies. Typically, pre-1790 records contain the applicants name, country of origin, date of naturalization, and their residence.

Post-1790

1790 Naturalization Law

The first naturalization law was passed in 1790. Since then, the process and records remained generally the same. The requirements included that a person needed to be an adult, live in the U.S. for the required period (two, five, or eleven years), live in the state for one year, and prove they had a good moral character. The three records created were the Declaration of Intention, Petition, and Certificate of Citizenship.

Declaration of Intention

This is also called the Declaration or the First Papers. The immigrant had to first declare to the court that they wanted to become a citizen. Some filed as soon as they arrived in the country, but many waited a few years. Any court could be used, but many chose the most convenient court.

Petition

This is also known as the Final or Second Papers. The immigrant was petitioning to the court that they followed the requirements and desired to still become a citizen. The Petition needed to be filed two or three years after the declaration, assuming the residency and moral character requirements were achieved. Any court could be used and did not have to be the same court as the Declaration.

Certificate of Citizenship

This is also called the certificate of naturalization or simply the certificate. The final step to complete the process was for the immigrant to take the oath of allegiance. They swore to renounce their former loyalties and pledge to the United States. Once this was completed, the newly sworn citizen received a certificate proving their citizenship and the court kept the certificate stub. The courthouse had to be the same as the Petition.

After 1906

Federal Departments

In 1906, new laws were passed, resulting in standardized forms throughout the country. The process and records after 1906 remained the same. More federal courts began to naturalize. Courts were also required to send copies of each record to the Federal department over immigration and naturalization. This department has gone through three name changes.

Bureau of Immigration Services

From 1906 to 1933, this department included two administrations: Bureau of Immigration and Bureau of Naturalization. They oversaw the federal laws and regulations.

Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS)

After 1933, the two administrations combined to form the INS. In addition to overseeing laws and regulations, they were tasked in border protection and enforcing laws. A copy was sent to the INS by the courts.

United States Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS)

In 2004, the INS was dissolved and replaced by three departments: USCIS, ICE, and CBP. The USCIS was created to oversee the application process of naturalization, while the other two departments focused on law enforcement and border protection. Today, they hold all records pertaining to Naturalization including:

- A-Files
- C-Files
- Visa Files
- Registry Files
- Certificate of Registry
- Certificate of Arrival

Value of Records After 1790

Even though the records created after 1790 remained the same, they still contained different information. Before 1906, no forms were standardized, so the information on the Declaration and Petition varied between states and courts. After 1906, the forms were created by the federal government and was the same throughout the country. The table on the right reveals what can be found in these naturalization records before and after 1906.

Information on Naturalization Records				
	Before 1906		After 1906	
Data	Declaration	Petition	Declaration	Petition
Name	★	★	★	★
Age		★(rarely)	★	
Birth info			★	★
Residence		★	★	★
Application date	★	★	★	★
Last foreign Address			★	★
Country of Birth or Allegiance	★	★	★	★
Occupation			★	★
Personal Description			★	★
Port & Date of Arrival	★ (rarely)	★(rarely)	★	★
Vessel & port of embarkation			★	★
Marital Status			★	★
Name of wife & children			★	★
Birth info of wife & children			★	★
Address of adult children			★	★
Where & when declaration filed				★
Witness affidavits				★

Looking for Clues

To discover if your ancestors naturalized, you need to know all of the variations of their names, including their birth name, maiden and married names, nicknames, and Americanized names. Ideally, you should know an approximate year of birth, what country they were born, about the year they immigrated, their residence in the US, and if they might have been part of a Collective or Derivative Naturalization.

There are many records you can turn to that might provide clues about the citizenship status of your ancestors:

- Census
- Immigration
- Voting Registers
- Passports
- Military
- Death
- Obituaries
- Histories
- Homestead Records
- Personal Collection

Federal Census Clues

	1820 - 1830	1850 - 1860	1870	1880	1900 - 1910	1920	1930	1940	1950
Aliens not naturalized	★				★	★			
Birthplace of individual		★	★	★	★	★	★	★	★
Birthplace of parents				★	★	★	★	☆	☆
Year of Immigration			★		★	★	★		
Naturalization Status					★	★	★	★	★
Year of Naturalization						★			
Years in Country					★				

☆ = Only on Certain Lines

Naturalization Status Meanings in Federal Census

1900-1930

- AL = Alien
- PA = First Papers
- NA = Naturalized
- NR = Not Reported

1940

- 1 = Foreign born, Naturalized
- 2 = Foreign born, 1st Papers
- 3 = Foreign born, Alien
- 4 = Foreign born, Citizen

1950

- Y = Yes
- N = No
- AP = American Parents, born abroad

Courts

There are a lot of courts in the United States that could Naturalize immigrants. Before 1906, mostly local or states courts participated. After 1906, it was mainly federal courts. The Declaration and Petition could be in any court, but the Petition and Certificate were in the same court. Here is a list of possible courts your ancestors naturalized in:

- Chancery
- Circuit
- City
- Common Pleas
- County
- District
- Equity
- Mayors
- Marine
- Municipal Police
- Probate
- Superior
- Supreme
- Surrogate

Websites

Ancestry.com – view card catalog and filter according to citizenship records and location.
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/catalog/>

Browning Genealogy & Local History – Immigration database with some naturalization information for certain counties in Illinois, Indiana, and Kentucky.
<https://www.browninggenealogy.org/cm/Databases/Immigration>

California Great Registers – County clerk voting registers includes naturalization information.
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/collection/1935764>

FamilySearch Catalog – search by place and find naturalization records.
<https://www.familysearch.org/search/catalog>

FamilySearch Wiki – look at United States or the specific locations naturalization page.
https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/United_States_Naturalization_and_Citizenship

Filby Books – helpful for colonial immigration and naturalization.
<https://www.ancestry.com/search/collections/7486/>

Fold3 – naturalization index cards for some states and U.S. passports.
<https://www.fold3.com/collection/non-military>

German Roots – places to find U.S. naturalization records and indexes online.
<https://www.germanroots.com/naturalization.html>

National Archives – learn about records or request a copy.
<https://www.archives.gov/research/immigration/naturalization>

Steve Morse – use to locate the ED on the census based on an address.
<https://stevemorse.org/census/unified.html>

USCIS – learn about records and request to order an index search or record request.
<https://www.uscis.gov/records/genealogy> or <https://www.uscis.gov/records/genealogy/historical-records-series-available-from-the-genealogy-program>